

Byzantine Art and Literature around the Year 800

Report on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1984

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The Symposium for 1984 was organized specially to explore a phase of Byzantine culture for which reliable evidence is notoriously scarce and difficult to interpret, and which is often considered inferior in accomplishment to periods a couple of generations earlier or later. In the spirit of exploration, therefore, a few senior specialists were invited to give major papers, and there was a call for submission of shorter papers; several of these were accepted, while others, although distinguished in scholarship, could not be accommodated because they did not specifically address the theme of the Symposium. To promote discussion, abstracts of the papers were sent in advance to those who had registered for the Symposium. There was very lively discussion following several of the papers, and Sunday morning, the last session of the Symposium, was devoted entirely to discussion and to short contributions from the floor.

The first day was devoted to literature, broadly conceived. Cyril Mango (University of Oxford) gave a brief general introduction, "The Background of the Byzantine Cultural Revival." He included some comparison with contemporary developments in the West, pointing out that the revival in the East tended to be later and more limited in accomplishments.

Paul Speck (Freie Universität Berlin) spoke on "The Gate of the Chalke, the Bulletin Board of the Palace: Art and Literature at the Chalke around the Year 800." He described the sequence in the decoration of the lunette above the entrance to the Chalke from the cross originally put there by Justinian I, to the relief of a bust of Christ with a cross behind his head installed by Justinian II, to the cross and inscriptions (apparently in prose) substituted by Leo III, to the return of the relief bust of Christ sponsored by Irene but now with acrostic inscriptions by Theodore the Studite, to the return of the cross under Leo V, now with elaborate acrostic epi-

grams, to the final return of the bust of Christ under Theodora, with a long theological epigram by Patriarch Methodius. He discussed this sequence of imperial decisions in connection with the intellectual history of the times, stressing the new concept of continuity with the much-admired past in art and literature in the time of Irene, and characterized this as the beginning of the Macedonian Renaissance, leading to its first climax in the time of Theodora, as exemplified by Leo the Mathematician and Photius. He has published his paper as "Ikonoklasmus und die Anfänge der Makedonischen Renaissance" in *Varia I*, *Poikila Byzantina* 4 (Bonn, 1984), 175–210.

Ihor Ševčenko (Harvard University) spoke on "The Search for the Past around 800." He described the remarkably high scholarly level of research into history by George Syncellus and pointed to reflections of his work in more popular chronicles of the time, including that of Theophanes. He pointed out that other writers from a lower level of literate society might be poorly informed about recent history, but that the very fact they attempted to write history reflected the scholarly leadership of writers like Syncellus, an essential basis for the first Byzantine humanism. He gave a later version of this paper in October 1984 at the Christian Archaeological Society of Athens, where it is expected to be published in Greek.

Cyril Mango then spoke on "The Byzantine Cultivated Public, ca. A.D. 800–850." He stressed the relative expansion of such a public at this time, pointing out that the introduction of minuscule script facilitated book production and that both hagiography and the revision of school handbooks flourished at this time. He discussed the surviving correspondence of Theodore the Studite and of Ignatius the Deacon, pointing to the large number of recipients of their letters, generally officials in

the capital, both lay and clerical. He suggested that this class had been decimated by persecutions early in the eighth century and by the plague of 746, creating a cultural void in the capital in the half century ca. 730–80, but that this class was then replenished by educated provincials, particularly by immigrants from Palestine, Syria, and Sicily.

The first day concluded with two shorter papers. Warren Treadgold (Hillsdale College) presented evidence to reconstruct “The Lost *Life* of St. Theophanes the Cubicularius (Died 780).” A fuller version of his paper has appeared as “An Indirectly Preserved Source for the Reign of Leo IV,” in the *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 34 (1984), 69–76. John Philip Thomas (then at Dumbarton Oaks and Georgetown University) spoke on “Private Religious Foundations and the Institutional Church around 800.” He explained how in the time of Irene such pre-existing foundations, particularly monasteries, were important to the iconodules as a source of educated clerical bureaucrats. Moreover, leading clerics such as Tarasius and Theodore the Studite then founded private monasteries, which served as training grounds for the next generation.

The second day was devoted to art. I began with a paper on “Insular Evidence for Byzantine Art around 800,” in which I pointed to iconographic and stylistic elements foreign to the English and Irish traditions and sought to identify those that must come from contemporary Byzantine models rather than from older works. Among these are the Virgin and Child page of the Book of Kells (assigned to Iona around 800 by comparison with local crosses) and the Evangelist portraits of the Barberini Gospels (assigned to Canterbury around 800 on the basis of its ornament). For narrative art I showed examples of relief sculpture from this period extending from St. Andrews in Scotland to Breedon-on-the-Hill in Leicester, to Reculver in Kent, emphasizing that all over the island there are examples of a new style with lively naturalistic figures, often with fluttering bits of drapery, sometimes associated with Byzantine iconography. There are traces of this also in the Book of Kells. Clearly this was a foreign style, which must have come from Byzantium. It swept over the island around 800 and ran its course in about one generation.

Florentine Mutherich (Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich) spoke on “Greek Elements in a Carolingian Gospel Book.” This splendid but unlocalized manuscript of the mid-ninth century (Cologne Cathedral Library Cod. 56) has three surviv-

ing Evangelist portraits that anticipate components of the Macedonian Renaissance, particularly the Evangelist portraits in Stavronikita Ms. 43. It also has canon tables based on the Greek scheme used in the sixth century, but not as far developed as the scheme used in Stavronikita 43, and there is a similar set of canon tables used in Tours in the first half of the ninth century. Therefore the Evangelist portraits of Cologne 56 must reflect a Byzantine model from before 843; whether that model dated from the time around 800 or from the sixth to seventh century can be decided only by further study of the Byzantine context.

Caecilia Davis-Weyer (Tulane University) spoke on “Roman Wall Mosaics around 800: Revival or Disintegration?” She reported on her technical studies of the mosaics, which appear to include reused tesserae, and she described the achievement of the vast program of mosaic decoration carried out for Pascal I partly by less skilled assistants. She distinguished between workshop practice, which particularly at the beginning of this development has a distinctly Byzantine character, and the role of papal patronage, which mostly required the use of older Roman iconographic models. Thereby she established a Byzantine element in this Roman development.

I spoke informally on “Artistic Continuity in Byzantine Coins and Seals of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries” to supplement the exhibition of fifty-five examples, with enlarged photographs, which I had arranged. For gold coinage I showed the continuity of simple iconography and respectable craftsmanship during the generations flanking the year 800, but also stressed that the classical bust of Christ used by Justinian II from 692 to 695 was reintroduced for Michael III in 843 or soon after. For seals I showed how the Hodegetria, introduced by Constantine IV and still used by Leo III until 726, reappeared from 787 to 815 as the normal iconography for seals of the emperor and of various officials and bishops. In the best specimens of these I pointed out that the figures tended to be better articulated and the drapery to have a more active pattern than in the seals around 700. After 843 the bust of Christ in classical style became normal for imperial seals (as on the coins of Michael III), although the Hodegetria still occurred on episcopal seals.

Margaret E. Frazer (Metropolitan Museum of Art) spoke briefly on “The Reliquaries of the True Cross of Pope Pascal I.” She analyzed the elaborate cycle of scenes from the life of Christ that decorates the cross-shaped reliquary and pointed to the un-

usual prominence of the Virgin in scenes such as the central Communion or Mission of the Apostles. The style of the figural decoration appears to be very closely related to that of the *Sacra Parallela* manuscript in Paris. The rectangular reliquary, on the other hand, is of lower artistic quality and has more normal iconography.

Ihor Ševčenko spoke briefly on "A Program of Church Decoration Soon after 787 according to the *Vita Tarasii* of Ignatius the Deacon." He distributed a translation of the relevant passages from the life of Tarasius, patriarch from 784 to 806, specifying that Tarasius had scenes of martyrdom painted in churches, and apparently referring also to representations of Christ and of prophets, and to illustrated Gospels or lectionaries. To supplement this important evidence for the prominence of images in church use soon after 787, he showed slides selected by Nancy Ševčenko of later representations of martyrdom corresponding in type to those vividly described by Ignatius the Deacon.

To conclude the second day I spoke informally of "Possibilities and Hypotheses for Discussion." I passed briefly in review a number of important Byzantine works that have sometimes been considered to date from this period, including the Vatican Ptolemy, Castelseprio, the Leo Scepter, the *Sacra Parallela*, the Garrett Gospels, and various silks from western treasuries. I also reviewed Carolingian and Roman works securely dated to this time and presumed to show Byzantine influence. I distinguished between the Schatzkammer Gospels, which is Greek in technique and iconography but which differs in style from other candidates for Byzantine influence at this time, and works such as the St. Mark of the Soissons Gospels, where the drapery appears to reflect the same lively Byzantine style that lies behind Insular examples such as the Book of Kells and the St. Andrews shrine. In Italy I distinguished between the stiff inherited style apparent in Pope Hadrian's fresco in S. Maria Antiqua and what I consider a fresh wave of Byzantine influence in the narrative scenes at S. Saba, in some of the mosaics of Leo III and Pascal I, and in the narrative scenes on the reliquaries of Pascal I.

The last session of the Symposium began with short prepared comments by Hans Belting (University of Munich), Annemarie Weyl Carr (Southern Methodist University), and Michael McCormick (Dumbarton Oaks and Johns Hopkins University), and continued with wide-ranging discussion and various short contributions from the floor. These cannot be recorded here, but in the spirit of the exploratory purpose of the Symposium I shall report that immediately after it I went to Rome and pursued Ihor Ševčenko's remark made in the discussion that he believed the original list of emperors in the Vatican Ptolemy ended with Constantine V; I found he was correct, and that other codicological and astronomical evidence established the date of the original manuscript as 753/4, and demonstrated that the book was continuously used and added to until the time of Leo VI (as reported in detail in an article appearing in *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*). Taking up some remarks by Caecilia Davis-Weyer, while in Rome I also investigated S. Saba more thoroughly and reported at the 1984 Byzantine Studies Conference further arguments to attribute the narrative scenes with Greek inscriptions to a Greek painter who might have accompanied Abbot Peter of S. Saba back to Rome after the Council of Nicaea in 787.

It seems that on the literary side the Symposium made clear to a more general audience what had already been known to some specialists: the period around 800 was the beginning of a broad cultural revival in Constantinople. On the artistic side the evidence for a corresponding revival is much more difficult to assess, but the Symposium brought together material for a working hypothesis that the years 787 to 815 saw a renewed flourishing of Christian art in the capital, that this art was characterized by a relatively lively and naturalistic figure style, and by a further development of iconographic cycles that was an important step toward the full maturity of Byzantine iconography in the generations after 843. Plans to publish other papers from the Symposium and further work growing out of it are being developed.

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